Race not place: the invasion, and possible retreat, of British historians of the American South

Article (Accepted Version)

Race not Place:

The invasion, and possible retreat, of British Historians of the American South

Does it matter where southern history is written, and who writes it? In the case of the writing of southern history by British scholars, there might seem to be straightforward answers both for and against. On the one hand, British academics who speak (to some extent) the same language as their southern counterparts, and are connected by increasing ease of travel and digital technology, have often considered themselves to be *bone fide* beans- and greens-eating southern historians, sometimes in offices replete with memorabilia from their sojourns to the region. Or, as Tony Badger, the most influential figure in the rise of academic interest in southern history in Britain, reflected in 1994 on his doctoral study of the New Deal in North Carolina: "I imagined myself to be a historian who happened to be British."[1] Following a trip to Europe three years later, the Georgia-based southern historian James C. Cobb concurred that, pronunciation apart, he felt on home turf with southern scholars in foreign climes. While Badger "can sound every bit the distinguished Cambridge Don," Cobb observed, "off-duty he is a disarmingly downhome, diehard Braves fan who prefers Budweiser to Guinness." (Badger did not, though, take to root beer or grits).[2] Indeed, with the recent appointment of a handful of southern-born, raised, and trained scholars to posts in UK universities, an increasing number of British-based historians of the South literally are southern historians who happen to work abroad.

The editor of the *Journal of Southern History* first suggested the subject of this article to the authors following the retirement of Tony Badger from the Paul Mellon Chair in American history at Cambridge, in 2014. The authors were two of Tony's first cohort of doctoral students and, like many Americanists in the United Kingdom and beyond, are deeply grateful for his support and example.

[1] Tony Badger, "Confessions of a British Americanist," *Journal of American History*, 79 (September 1992), 515–523, 517. This fits with a wider picture among Americanists of Badger's generation. Michael J. Heale, who has written extensively on British scholarship of American history, commented how, "they tend to see themselves as professional historians of the U.S. whose jobs just happen to be in Britain." Heale, "Writings in Great Britain on United States History, 1945-1980: Some Reflections on a Liberal Moment," in *Guide to the Study of United States History Outside the U.S.*, ed. Lewis Hanke (White Plains, NY, 1985), II, 370. On European Americanists choosing between "going native" and standing apart, see Francois Weil, "Do American Historical Narratives Travel?" in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender (Berkeley, 2002), 317-42. On increasing links because of technology and travel, see Susan-Mary Grant, "American History, British Historians: The Trans-Atlantic Perspective," *Journal of Southern History,* Vol. 71, No. 2 (May, 2005), 521-3.

[2] James Cobb, "Vienna Sausage, Faulkner and Elvis," March 30, 2005, http://cobbloviate.com/2005/03/vienna-sausage-faulkner-and-elvis.html. On not like root beer and grits, see Tony Badger, "Southern History from the Outside," in John Boles, ed., *Shapers of Southern History: Autobiographical Reflections* (Athens, Ga., 2004), 207.

By contrast, on occasion, the reception of British scholars within the South suggests that national origin or location could be significant. At the Southern Historical Convention in Orlando in 1994, for example, the Arkansas-based historian Elizabeth Jacoway responded to a panel of British historians that included Badger by pondering the challenges that the scholars "with charming British accents" faced in terms of understanding the nuances of southern culture. The following year, the fall edition of the *Georgia Historical Quarterly* ran a special section on "British Scholarship on civil rights" that linked, via the authors' national identity, three disparate articles that stretched across 4000 miles, from civic pride in Savannah to Martin Luther King's visit to the English city of Newcastle.[3] Book reviews in US journals have sometimes remarked upon a British scholar's identity. In 2001 in the *American Historical Review*, for example, the then Alabama-based historian Jack Davis, reviewing a book by a British author on the Georgia civil rights movement, began by commenting on "the recent British invasion" who published with American university presses, naming a handful of other British historians of civil rights.[4]

Jacoway's remarks were mostly positive, and Davis' review was generous, comparing the British historians to the Beatles (though who was John Lennon and who was Ringo Starr was never made clear).[5] More often than not any comments about British writing in Southern history welcome "the outsider's point of view," to quote a 2004 review in this journal of a collection of essays on the Civil War that was a collaboration between British and American historians. Or as the South-Carolinian historian of Southern Culture, Charles Joyner put it, in the opening essay in the same collection, "any history studied only by insiders, or any history studied only by outsiders, is only half-studied."[6]

---

[3] *Georgia Historical Quarterly,* 79 (Fall 1995).

[4] Jack E. Davis, review of Stephen G. N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940–1980* (Athens, Ga., 2001), *American Historical Review* 107 (December 2002): 1595–96, quote on 1595; see too Steven F. Lawson, review of Tuck, *We Ain't What We Ought To Be*, *Journal of American History* 97 (September 2010): 479–8, which also began with a list of names of other British scholars of civil rights.

[5] Virtually all comments from southern-based scholars, we should add at the outset, has been positive. This review is not a defense of British-based scholarship (let alone a comment on US scholarship), but an exploration, using this example, of whether location matters to the writing of southern history.

[6] Anne J. Bailey, review of *The Legacy of Disunion, The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 70, No. 3 (Aug., 2004), p. 696; Charles Joyner, ""Forget Hell!": The Civil War in Southern Memory," in Susan-Mary Grant and Peter J. Parish, eds., *Legacy of Disunion: The Enduring Significance of the American Civil War,* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press; 2003), 18.

The fact that nationality is remarked upon at all, however, suggests the question of where southern history is written from is worth exploring. After all, southern historians have long asserted that identity or location matters when the historian is from the South.[7] Joyner's essay, in fact, was a personal reflection on the opportunities and challenges for a Southern historian of the South. Many a dust jacket points out when the author is an nth generation southerner, and many a preface to a book on southern history ties the author's biography to the story they are telling. The great southern historian C. Vann Woodward wrote of the particular regional style of didactic storytelling, and regularly commented on his position as a Southerner in the writing of Southern history.[8] Glenda Gilmore, the Peter V. and C. Vann Woodward Professor of History at Yale, argued in 1999 that "the key" for historians of southern racism, was to recognize that "we all have a stake in the story we are telling." "Taking self-position seriously" was vital since, "All of us, white and Black, were wounded and bent by white supremacy." Reflecting on her own life growing up in the South, Gilmore concluded, "objects in the mirror are closer than they appear. Our pasts – personal and collective – are present within us." Perhaps not surprisingly, when Gilmore delivered a version of this paper to Badger's history seminar at the University of Cambridge, some of the first questions were all along the lines of, "so where does that leave us?"[9]

This article addresses the question of "where does that leave us" by tracing the development of British historical writing on the South, which spans almost half a century and includes dozens of scholars.[10] The article explores the ways in which

---

[7] See, for example, preface to John Boles, ed., *Autobiographical Reflections on Southern Religious History* (Athens, Ga., 2001), vii.

[8] Helpful reflections on Woodward's approach include Glenda Gilmore, "Which Southerners? Which Southern Historians? A Century of Teaching Southern History at Yale," *The Yale Review* (January 2011): 56-69; and J. Morgan Kousser and James McPherson, "C. Vann Woodward: An Assessment of His Work and Influence," *Region, Race, and Reconstruction: Essays in Honor of C. Vann Woodward* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), xii-xxxvii.

[9] The paper was very well received, although one senior historian complained, "this is precisely the sort of history I don't like." No doubt such a comment didn't come as a surprise to Gilmore – she noted that for some, "authorial self-positioning" was like "tasting the forbidden fruit." Glenda Gilmore, "But she can't find her (V.O.) Key," *Feminist Studies*, 25 (Spring 1999), 146-7, 150.

[10] Precisely defining southern history (or who is a southern historian) is problematic, of course, because the history of the South is also part of national and international history. To take one example, historian Kate Dossett's (Leeds University) first book explored Black women's activism across the United States, but also won the Southern Association for Women Historian's 2009 prize for best book in Southern women's history. *Bridging Race Divides: Black Nationalism, Feminism and Integration in the United States, 1896-1935* (Gainesville, Fla., 2008). For this article, we reflect primarily on scholarship (and scholars) with a primary focus on aspects of Southern history (at some point in their career), though recognizing that such scholarship is intertwined with national and international history.

British scholarship has followed distinctive patterns (and the ways in which it has not).[11] It is thus a comparative study as well as one that identifies connections, a study that also invites comparison with writing on American history more generally in the UK, and other writing by overseas scholars on the American South. In the case of European scholarship, Germany and Italy have particularly rich traditions of southern historical writing—although the comparison, we hope, is with scholars based South, and North, of the Mason-Dixon line, too.[12]

Like Badger, most British historians of the South have ostensibly sought to write neutral history (or, as Gilmore described such an approach, "neutered" history).[13] In fact, though, the evidence from the history of British scholarship of the southern past suggests otherwise. Many British historians seem to have been attracted to the history of the US South precisely because they did have a stake, perhaps unwittingly, certainly unacknowledged, in the history they were telling. In particular, the majority of British historians were drawn to southern history as a means to explore questions of race and equality.

A focus on British scholarship about the South also addresses the larger epistemological question about the conditions that shape the production of historical literature more generally. In the case of British writing on the South, the key issue is not 'being British' or having 'an outsider's point of view,' but a combination of the structures (including institutions, audiences, and academic networks) and cultures (such as the politics of the moment, and personal investment) that shaped scholarship. Thus the question is about position and location rather than national identity (though the latter may be intertwined). Reflecting on this particular case study, then, raises issues about the structural and cultural influences upon writing southern history or indeed any history, wherever a historian may be based.

A study of the writing on the American South in Britain also invites reflection on the project to internationalize the writing of United States history more generally – but in this case, with regard to writing regional history. Launched a generation ago to much fanfare by the major US historical associations and their journals, the project

---

[11] There is no single pattern, of course – historians in the UK, as elsewhere, have many other (stronger) influences on their research and career beyond their location.
[12] British writing on Southern history is, of course, inextricably intertwined with British writing on American history more generally – but this article will seek to explore where the study of Southern history fits with broader trends among British Americanists, and where it diverges.
[13] Gilmore, "But she can't find her (V.O.) Key, 150.

sought to de-provincialize the writing of American history, with an explicit hope that including foreign scholarship would lead to new perspectives, provide new models of connecting historians to their publics, and bolster efforts to write transnational history.[14] Some southern historians and particularly southern literary scholars associated with the New Southern Studies quickly followed suit.[15] As the British southern historian Brian Ward, noted in 2014, the New Southern Studies' "emphasis on hemispheric and global connections ... promised to exorcize the ghost of southern exceptionalism and add nuance to analyses of the region."[16] Thus the South, with its strong but troubled self-identity, well-developed scholarly infrastructure (including this journal), and attraction to scholars abroad, provides an ideal region for reflection on the state of the internationalization project.

Somewhat surprisingly, then, there has been limited reflection in print given to the writing of southern history abroad. There have been some sessions on the state of southern history abroad at the annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association, but they seem to have been as ill-attended as they have been sporadic.[17] Such attention that there has been has tended to catalog overseas interest rather than reflect on the impact of location on historical writing, or to explore the internationalizing of Southern history as a subject rather than reflect on where it is being written.[18] This lack of reflection also comes despite, or perhaps because of, the flourishing of international connections, such as the "Understanding the South" research partnership between the Universities of Manchester, Copenhagen, Cambridge, and Florida in 2008-10 that held four conferences and produced three edited books. In a keynote speech at the second conference, Michael O'Brien, the preeminent intellectual

---

[14] See, for example, David Thelen, "Of Audiences, Borderlands, and Comparisons: Toward the Internationalization of American History, *The Journal of American History,* 79 (September 1992), 432-62.

[15] Michael O'Brien, "Epilogue: Place as Everywhere, On Globalizing the American South," in William A. Link, David Brown, Brian Ward, and Martyn Bone, eds., *Creating Citizenship in the Nineteenth-Century South*, (Gainesville, Fla, 2013), 271-90.

[16] Ward noted that the call to recognize transnational connections was also accompanied by a call to embrace interdisciplinarity. Brian Ward, "Forum: What's New in Southern Studies – And Why Should We Care?" *Journal of American Studies*, 48 (August 2014), 691-733, 691. See also Houston A. Baker and Dana D. Nelson, Preface: Violence, the Body and "The South," *American Literature*, 73 (June 2001), 231-44; Martyn Bone, *Where the New World Is: Literature about the U.S. South at Global Scales* (Athens, Ga., 2018); Jon Smith, "What the New Southern Studies Does Now," *Journal of American Studies,* 49 (November 2015), 861-70.

[17] According to the report on the SHA conference of 1989, for example, the roundtable on "Southern Studies Abroad" had fewer attendees than almost all the parallel sessions.

[18] For an excellent overview, see Peter Kolchin, "The South and the World," *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 75, No. 3 (August 2009), 565-580.

historian of the South, suggested that it was the very ease of such exchanges which meant that those committed to the globalization of southern studies "took the existence of a transnational conversation about the South for granted."[19] Perhaps, too, the call to decenter national history through internationalization may have seemed less noteworthy to regional historians who had never been wedded to the national framing of US history in the first place.[20] Conversely, although there has been attention in Europe given to writing US history from abroad, this has mostly not addressed the writing of U.S. regional history.[21]

In order to explore the development of the study of southern history in Britain, this article draws on personal reflections of historians in print and academic discussions. Such reflections are scattered, though, and had their own agendas and audiences in mind, so we also canvassed opinion through a questionnaire of southern historians in Britain that invited critical self-reflection on the personal careers of respondents as well as the broader state of the profession.[22] The article reflects on the publications of British scholars of the South, too, and the reception and impact of this work in the United States. To trace the development of the field in terms of institutional growth and research agendas, the article draws on the (far from complete) databases of British professional bodies on doctoral study in history, and on

---

[19] O'Brien, "Epilogue," 272.

[20] Indeed, some historians have sought to challenge perceptions of southern exceptionalism by tying the region's history to the nation. As Joe Crespino and Matthew Lassiter put it in their introduction to *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism:* "our agenda is not to absolve the South but to implicate the nation." Lassiter and Crespino, "The End of Southern History," 7 in *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (New York, 2009). Southern-based historians have also had plenty enough outsider perspectives on hand from historians, and histories, beyond the Mason-Dixon line, rather than needing to look abroad. When discussing the distinctiveness of Southern character in the *Burden of Southern History*, C. Vann Woodward noted that "in all the essays the main comparison is with the North, or the non-Southern parts of America," xii. John Boles asked contributors to his book on autobiographical reflections on writing Southern religious history "How did your experience of region … in the South, or in the North, affect your choices?" *Shapers of Southern History*, vii.

[21] See, for example, Grant, "American History, British Historians"; Nicolas Barreyre, Michael Heale, Stephen Tuck, and Cecile Vidal, eds., *Historians Across Borders: Writing American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley, 2014); Nicolas Barreyre, Michael Heale, Stephen Tuck, Irmina Wawrzyczek, eds., "You the People" Roundtable, *The American Historical Review*, 119 (June 2014), 741-823.

[22] The short questionnaire asked open questions about reasons for choosing the South, impact of national location, audiences, travel, networks, teaching, approach and identification, as well as an opportunity to make any other comments. A request to complete the questionnaire was sent in 2011 (and some subsequently) to historians who were identified as working principally on southern history topics, using the database gathered by the Leverhulme Trust funded *You the People* project (2008-2014). A majority responded. A few questionnaires were also sent to senior Southern historians on continental Europe. No doubt there were other British historians whose work on various aspects of American history incorporated substantial amounts of Southern history that were not contacted (because they were not listed as working on Southern topics on the database), as will be the case for many of the Southern historians who have taken up posts since 2014.

employment in UK universities.[23] By looking at the work of historians of the South in Britain, rather than of "British" historians of the South, the article recognizes that being British is not an explanation in itself, and that scholars have (increasingly) moved in both directions across the Atlantic at various stages of their careers.[24]

This article maps the growth of British scholarship through three distinct generations. Though there was occasional interest in the South earlier in the twentieth century, it was only during the 1970s that the first generation of British scholars of the South emerged. These historians explored a range of topics and sought to integrate into the American academy – as would all subsequent British historians of the South. A second, much larger, group of scholars studied southern history at the end of the century. This generation mostly focused on race, with particular interest in the civil rights movement. More recently, a new, but somewhat smaller, generation of southern historians has explored a wider range of themes, while some established scholars of civil rights have turned towards a more explicitly transnational and comparative approach. The article will then explore, in turn, possible cultural and structural explanations for the particular development of British scholarship, before a concluding consideration of the prospects for the future.

What becomes clear is that the writing of southern history has been shaped, often in subtle, hidden, and unexpected ways, by the practical constraints upon, and opportunities for, academics based in British universities. In particular, the second generation's laser-like focus on race and rights spoke to a distinctive British moment of engagement with southern history. Indeed, the overall picture that emerges is how few British historians have been drawn to southern history *per se*. Rather, many were drawn to a subject – the Black freedom struggle, during slavery and since emancipation– that was understood to have played out in the South. In doing so, a few became southern historians more generally, but others shifted their focus away from

---

[23] Databases or statistics on doctoral research are available from the Institute of Historical Research and the (British) *Journal of American Studies*. They do not seem to be comprehensive, though. Both authors of this article note that not all of our research students are listed on the IHR database, and the *JAS* includes details on British doctorates only in its earlier issues for the most part. This article also draws on information gathered by the *You the People* project.

[24] According to statistics from the *You the People* project, in 2012, some 32 of 190 British postholders in American history had studied for their doctorate in the United States. Because the article is primarily about location rather than nationality, there is no discussion of "British" born or trained scholars who are based in the United States. The London-born historian of Reconstruction Michael Perman, to take but one example, studied at Oxford as an undergraduate and at Chicago for his doctorate, and taught at Manchester briefly before returning to Chicago (and published his first book after returning to the United States).

the region as the historiographies of race developed beyond the South. The cultural and structural influences on the development of southern historical writing in Britain raise issues that, we hope, will be of interest not just for those who study southern history in Britain, but for all who are involved in teaching and researching the history of the South.

*

Although academic study of the United States, including the South, gained increasing respectability in Britain from the 1950s, much of that early scholarship took the form of syntheses of the secondary literature written for a British readership.[25] It was a further two decades before the emergence of a new generation of historians that focused on the South. According to the Institute of Historical Research's database, a dozen British scholars wrote doctoral theses on the South during the 1970s, supervised by academics who worked on other aspects of US history. This still represented a small minority of interest in the South among British Americanists, given what was a growing interest in US history more generally. (According to the same database, in the same decade British doctoral students completed 75 theses on aspects of American history unrelated to the South.)[26] Yet this group of young historians continued into academic careers, and their work, rooted in thorough archival research, earned recognition on the other side of the Atlantic for the first time. The publication of monographs based on their doctoral theses by American university presses marked this transition in terms of how these scholars sought to position themselves within the US academy.

The first monograph from this generation to appear in print was *The Democratic Party and the Politics of Sectionalism* by Robert Garson of Keele University. Published by Louisiana State University Press in 1974, the book received respectable reviews that consistently made mention of the author's nationality without

[25] For further background on the development of American history in Britain, see Michael Heale, "The British Discovery of American History: War, Liberalism and the Atlantic Connection," *Journal of American Studies*, 39 (December 2005): 357-69; Heale in Hanke, ed., *Guide to the Study of United States History Outside the US*, II, 305-532; and Heale, "American History: The View from Britain," *Reviews in American History,* Vol. 14, No. 4, (1986), 501-22.

[26] "Theses completed (UK)", www.history.ac.uk/history-online/theses. There may have been more theses written during the 1970s given the database's many errors and omissions, including the absence of information from American Studies rather than History Departments.

considering how this may have influenced his interpretation of the schisms that afflicted the Democratic Party from the 1930s.[27] Yet Garson was a political historian who happened to write about regional tensions rather than being interested in the South in particular. His later career took him in a different direction that focused on other aspects of American domestic politics as well as foreign policy. Similarly, Philip Morgan at University College London, who completed his doctoral thesis on American slave culture in 1978, would develop his career as an early American historian more generally, with subsidiary interests in the early Caribbean and the Atlantic World. (His 1998 Bancroft prize-winning *Slave Counterpoint*, though, focused on Virginia and South Carolina). Morgan's career would take him, permanently, to the United States.[28]

Others in this founding generation, however, would remain focused on southern history. The most significant of the new torchbearers for the study of the South were Tony Badger, Michael O'Brien, and Betty Wood, all later to become colleagues at Cambridge. Badger and O'Brien, based respectively at Hull and Cambridge as postgraduates, spent significant time in the South in completion of their doctoral studies. O'Brien had also studied for a masters degree at Vanderbilt. Wood, who was an undergraduate at Keele, went a step further by pursuing her doctoral research at the University of Pennsylvania before her appointment at Cambridge. She would continue to publish on southern slavery, particularly in Georgia, though broadening to include the history of enslaved women and men in the Caribbean. Badger became chair of US history in Cambridge in 1992, following two decades at Newcastle (and a visiting stint at Tulane), his work developing from the New Deal in the South to southern liberalism more generally. O'Brien built his career in the United States, mostly in the South, before returning to his alma mater in 2002 – his Bancroft-prize winning *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South* was published two years later.[29]

At the outset of his career, O'Brien seemed unconcerned about the obstacles posed by being a foreign observer of the South. Indeed, he saw it as an asset,

---

[27] Robert Garson, *The Democratic Party and the Politics of Sectionalism* (Baton Rouge, 1974).
[28] Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth –Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill, 1998). Morgan had a one-year return to the UK, as Oxford's Harmsworth Professor in 2011.
[29] Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860* (Chapel Hill, 2004).

observing in the introduction to the book based on his thesis, *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941* (1979), that he "had no partisanship on the competing moral claims" about the region's identity.[30] What O'Brien nonetheless shared with Badger and Wood was an aspiration to engage primarily with, and be treated on the same terms as, their American peers. Or, as Badger put it, "What people of my generation wanted to do was to be virtually indistinguishable from American graduate students."[31] In this, all three succeeded. There was an occasional note of condescension in American reviews of their work. Given O'Brien's future career, C. Hugh Holman's assertion that O'Brien, in *The Idea of the American South* "has too limited a knowledge of the region whose idea he would define" was unfortunate.[32] But reviews of Badger's *Prosperity Road: The New Deal, Tobacco, and North Carolina* (1980) and Wood's *Slavery in Colonial Georgia, 1730-1775* (1984) made almost no reference to the nationality of the authors as a fact or as an influence on their historical analysis. The absence of any self-positioning in the introduction to either of their books about the challenges of being a British historian of the South further deflected attention from their outsider status.

The careers of these historians show that there was no single, national academic experience in Britain (just as is there was not in the US or the South).[33] Badger had completed his undergraduate degree at Cambridge but pursued his graduate study at Hull, in the North East of England, because of the institution's freedom from the intellectual snobbery about American history that prevailed at his alma mater. Many of the scholars who immediately followed him also tended to be based at universities outside of Cambridge and Oxford, where disdain for US history remained marked. (One Cambridge don recalled being told, as an undergraduate in the 1950s, "American history is not a fit subject for a gentleman.") [34] Instead, they turned to newer institutions that treated academic study of the United States with greater enthusiasm. Badger recalls that though he was the only Americanist studying

---

[30] Michael O'Brien, *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941* (Baltimore, 1979), xi. For more on O'Brien's comfort with his outsider status, see Joel Isaac and Samuel James, Michael O'Brien obituary, *Guardian*, May 14, 2015.
[31] "An Interview with Tony Badger," July 4, 2014, https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/an-interview-with-tony-badger-50-years-a-historian.
[32] C. Hugh Holman, review of Michael O'Brien, *The Idea of the American South, 1920-1941*, *American Historical Review*, 85 (February 1980), 229-30.
[33] For more on the variety of experiences of British academics studying US history, see Roundtable on *Historians Across Borders, Journal of American Studies*, 49 (November 2015), 879-905.
[34] Heale, "British Discovery of American History," 361.

for a doctorate at Hull, the subject was respected, and as in a growing number of provincial universities, there was an American studies department and good library holdings (in part due to funding from the United States Information Agency). He also appreciated support from colleagues and staff: "it was a wonderful time."[35]

One particularly important university was Keele, in central England, one of the first universities in the country to have an American studies department.[36] There, Mary Ellison, who wrote her first book on British connections to the US Civil War, and subsequently worked on African American history, supervised several students who went on to academic careers in aspects of southern history.[37] Among them was the civil rights historian Adam Fairclough, whose first book, *To Redeem the Soul of America? The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1987), was adapted from his doctoral dissertation.[38] Other historians supervised by Ellison included Peter Ling and Kevern Verney. Larry Hudson also undertook his doctoral research at Keele, producing a thesis later turned into the book *To Have and to Hold: Slave Work and Family Life in Antebellum South Carolina* (1997). Hudson, who succeeded where many other British Americanists have failed by securing a faculty position on the other side of the Atlantic, was moreover one of the rare Black scholars within the ranks of a (still) overwhelmingly white historical profession in the United Kingdom.[39] (In 2019, one newly arrived Southern historian from the US commented, "I find it problematic that because of the lack of racial diversity in UK faculty, students at my university just hear about southern history from white faculty."[40])

---

[35] Badger, "Southern History from the Outside," 206.
[36] Although this article's discussion of academic training focuses on the postgraduate stage, no doubt American studies departments also provided the first opportunities for many future academics to first encounter Southern history. Betty Wood, for example, noted that her interest in American and especially Southern history "probably would not have happened" without being able to wait to choose her honors subjects until after taking a foundation year which exposed her to US history. Reply to author questionnaire.
[37] Ellison's books include *Support for Secession: Lancashire and the American Civil War* (Chicago, 1972); *The Black Experience: American Blacks Since 1865* (London, 1974); and *Extensions of the Blues* (London, 1989).
[38] Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America? The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, Ga., 1987).
[39] Larry E. Hudson, Jr., *To Have and to Hold: Slave Work and Family Life in Antebellum South Carolina* (Athens, Ga, 1997). On the continued whiteness of the British historical profession, see the 2018 Royal Historical Society "Race, Ethnicity and Equality" Report. "Among UK-national staff, 96.1% of university historians are White, a figure … higher than in most other subjects. Underrepresentation is particularly stark for Black historians, who make up less than 1% of UK university-based History staff." https://royalhistsoc.org/racereport/.
[40] Response to questionnaire.

The turn of the century saw the publication of a slew of first monographs on aspects of southern history by recently minted PhDs who constituted a second generation of British southernists. By our count, by 2005 some 36 university historians of the United States in Britain worked primarily on southern historical topics. On the face of it, this increased interest in the South was consistent with an increase in the study of US history in Britain more generally.[41] For example, the number of articles on southern history published in the interdisciplinary British *Journal of American Studies* (founded in 1967) in each decade increased only very gradually from eight articles during the 1970s to 13 in the 2000s (and, given the increase in numbers of published research articles in the journal, this only amounted in a rise from 5% to 7% of the total). But given that the majority of British historians of the United States worked on aspects of either British colonial history or US foreign policy, the proportion of those focused on southern history was strikingly high. Nearly half of the 65 British historians who focussed on US domestic history since the colonial era worked on aspects of southern history. For comparison, or rather contrast, only four British historians of America focused on the West.[42]

The most significant feature of this second generation of southern historians, though, was not the rapid increase in size. Rather, it was a disproportionate interest in race relations. Of the 36 historians of the South at the turn of the century, some 31 worked on race issues. (The other five worked on crime, the Civil War, intellectual history, Irish immigration, and queer history – race was far from unrelated to much of this research, of course). And of these 31, 10 focused on slavery, and 21 looked at the civil rights movement, often conceived as a southern mid-20th century phenomenon. In other words, more than half of the scholars of the American South who were based in Britain at the end of the century worked on various aspects of the modern Black freedom struggle.[43] This focus on race by Southern historians fits with trends among

---

[41] See the substantial but (according to the author) still incomplete list of titles by British scholars provided by Michael J. Heale, "American History in Great Britain," in *Teaching and Studying U.S. History in Europe: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Cornelis A. van Minnen and Sylvia L. Hilton (Amsterdam, 2007), 141.

[42] According to figures drawn from the "You the People" project, there were 190 US historians working at British universities in 2010. Of these, some 65 worked on domestic history since the colonial period (the remainder worked on foreign policy/international history, or on British colonial history).

[43] Moreover, according to the You the People database, of the 65 historians of domestic US history who were not primarily working on aspects of Southern history, 14 were focused on African American history or race relations – often this included attention to the South, too. This compares with just two

British Americanists more generally, and fits a wider European interest in race in America, too.[44] In a paper delivered to the Southern Historical Association in 2007, the German historian of civil rights, Manfred Berg, concluded that it was "The study of race, in particular, [that] has helped a great deal to kindle new interest in the South, especially among German historians of slavery and the civil rights movement."[45]

Studies of slavery by historians in Britain included examinations of romantic relationships between bondsmen and women by Emily West and Rebecca J. Fraser, and Richard J. Follett's reinterpretation of plantation management in the sugar cane fields of Louisiana.[46] British historians also explored the importance of class as well as race to antebellum southern society with assessments of nonslaveholding whites, including Timothy Lockley's case study of Lowcountry Georgia and David Brown's biography of polemicist Hinton Rowan Helper.[47] There were fewer works on the Jim Crow era, a notable exception being Vivien Miller's study of the convict lease system and state parole board in Florida.[48] Labor historian Timothy Minchin's main focus was on southern trade unionism, and this inevitably included research on race. Minchin's prodigious output—five books in seven years —suggested an uncanny absorption of the production line processes that he studied.[49]

Research on the civil rights movement included respective case studies of Arkansas and Georgia by John Kirk and Stephen Tuck; an exploration of the ties

---

scholars working on Native American history, one on Jewish history, and one on Irish history. (The next most popular topic after African American history was the history of film).

[44] Michael Heale, Sylvia Hilton, Halina Parafianowicz, Paul Schor, and Maurizio Vaudagna noted, "European scholars have written extensively on American slavery and race." They suggested European historians were "intrigued by the looming presence in American history of a phenomenon so at odds with the values enunciated in the Declaration of Independence." Our suggestion here is that the interest in race was for reasons much closer to home. Michael Heale et al., "Watersheds in Time and Place, Writing American History in Europe," in Heale et al., *Historians Across Borders*, 4.

[45] Manfred Berg, "Teaching Southern History Abroad: Germany," paper delivered to the Southern Historical Association Annual Meeting, Richmond, Virginia, 2007.

[46] Emily West, *Chains of Love: Slave Couples in Antebellum South Carolina* (Urbana, Ill., 2004); Rebecca J. Fraser, *Courtship and Love Among the Enslaved in North Carolina* (Jackson, Miss., 2007); Richard J. Follett, *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820-1860* (Baton Rouge, 2005).

[47] Timothy James Lockley, *Lines in the Sand: Race and Class in Lowcountry Georgia, 1750-1860* (Athens, Ga, 2001); David Brown, *Southern Outcast: Hinton Rowan Helper and The Impending Crisis of the South* (Baton Rouge, 2006).

[48] Vivien M. L. Miller, *Crime, Sexual Violence, and Clemency: Florida's Pardon Board and Penal System in the Progressive Era* (Gainesville, Fla, 2000).

[49] Minchin's many books include *Hiring the Black Worker: The Racial Integration of the Southern Textile Industry*, 1960-1980 (Chapel Hill, 1999); *The Color of Work: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Southern Paper Industry, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill, 2000); *Forging a Common Bond: Labor and Environmental Activism in the BASF Lockout* (Gainesville, Fla, 2003); *'Don't Sleep With Stevens!': The J.P. Stevens Campaign and the Struggle to Organize the South, 1963-80*. Gainesville, Fla, 2005); *Fighting Against the Odds: A History of Southern Labor Since World War II* (Gainesville, Fla, 2005).

between massive resistance and anticommunism by George Lewis; a study of the relationship between African Americans and Jewish Americans by Clive Webb, and Brian Ward's analysis of the relationship between black popular music and racial protest.[50] The concentration on civil rights among British historians of the South became even greater because some of the earlier generation of scholars turned their attention to the subject. This was true of Tony Badger, who focused on white southern politicians' responses to desegregation, and Peter Ling, author of a first book on the impact of the automobile on American society who subsequently wrote a biography of Martin Luther King and worked on the development of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Robert Cook made a similar transition, following a first book about the Republican Party in nineteenth-century Iowa with a sweeping study of the civil rights movement, while Kevern Verney moved forward from "Black" Reconstruction via a study of Booker T. Washington to various books on the civil rights movement and, more recently, running a research network on Barack Obama.[51] Earlier historians who had started their work on civil rights continued in the field, such as Adam Fairclough, who wrote a study of the civil rights movement in Louisiana.[52]

The work of this second generation of researchers gained some recognition in the United States. It was at this point that British-based historians first started to publish in the *Journal of Southern History* in significant numbers, with ten articles in the decade following November 1999, compared with just five in total previously, from the founding of the journal in 1935. Of these ten articles, eight focused on race. Little surprise, then, that American reviewers could speak of a British "invasion" in civil rights history. The interest in race was also reflected in publications in Britain's *Journal of American Studies* – half of the twelve articles published in the 1990s on the

---

[50] John A. Kirk, *Redefining the Color Line: Black Activism in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1940-1970* (Gainesville, Fla., 2002); Stephen Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia, 1940-1980* (Athens, Ga, 2001); George Lewis, *The White South and the Red Menace: Segregationists, Anticommunism, and Massive Resistance* (Gainesville, Fla., 2004); Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley, 1998).
[51] Peter J. Ling, *America and the Automobile: Technology, Reform and Social Change, 1893-1923* (Manchester, 1990); Peter J. Ling, *Martin Luther King, Jr* (London, 2002); Robert Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty? The African-American Struggle for Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1997). Kevern Verney, *The Debate on Black Civil Rights in America* (New York, 2000), Kevern Verney, *The Art of the Possible: Booker T. Washington and Black Leadership in the United States, 1881-1925* (New York, 2001).
[52] Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens, Ga.).

US South were on aspects of the American civil rights movement, compared with just one of eleven articles in the previous decade.

A third generation of southern historians now holds faculty positions at universities across the United Kingdom. Among recent appointments are an increasing number of American-born and -trained scholars. There have long been Americans who have taught their own nation's history in Britain, including Edward Countryman and William Dusinberre at Warwick and Richard King at Nottingham.[53] While it would be an exaggeration to suggest that this stream of American scholars heading to Britain has now become a flood, their numbers have appreciably increased. This may be because southern (and US) history has become so well established in the United Kingdom, and because British scholarship has achieved sufficient status within the United States, that such posts are now attractive. Or it may be simply because increasing ease of international travel, and the research benefits of the digital revolution, has made such a move less disruptive for personal and professional reasons. As with any migration, push factors – in this case, the tightening of the American job market – may also have come in to play. American-born and -trained scholars of the South who have settled in the United Kingdom included Anthony Stanonis, at Queen's, Belfast; Bruce Baker at Newcastle; John Howard at King's College, London; and Melissa Milewski at Sussex.[54] One conspicuous arrival was Catherine Clinton, who held a chair at Queen's University in Belfast between 2006 and 2014. Another American, Benjamin Houston, based at Newcastle, researched his dissertation on civil rights in Nashville under the supervision of Brian Ward during the latter's tenure at the University of Florida, making Houston an American in Britain educated by a Briton in America.

*

When reflecting on why they were drawn to the study of the South, British scholars tend to offer one of two seemingly contradictory explanations: the South is either

[53] These American scholars helped inspire British historians to pursue academic careers. William Dusinberre, for example, taught, among others, Michael Tadman, Robert Cook, and Clive Webb.
[54] For Stanonis' reflections on working in the UK, see "Historians Across Borders" roundtable in *Journal of American Studies*. As with British Americanists, some new arrivals who are Americanists rather than Southern historians per se also write on aspects on Southern history. For example Joanna Cohen's (Queen Mary's London) work on consumption, citizenship, capitalism and culture in the American nation and Atlantic world in the nineteenth century pays careful attention to developments in the South. Cohen did her BA in Cambridge and her graduate work at Northwestern and Pennsylvania.

familiar, or exotic, to British observers.[55] To take the latter first, Tony Badger recalled reading a book when he was twelve that introduced him to the "colorful antics" of Huey Long that "seemed a world away from the gray proprieties of the Harold Macmillan-Hugh Gaitskell struggle in the British general election that was then taking place in 1959." The fact Long was assassinated "came as a big shock" to the young Badger.[56] What was true in 1959 still held half a century later. For Dundee historian Zoe Colley, studying the civil rights movement was a chance to try "researching something different to what I'm 'used to.'" Scottish-born and -trained, Swansea-based historian of southern memory, David Anderson, remembers his passion for the *Dukes Of Hazzard* inspiring his early interest in the South. Perhaps the larger-than-life nature of Dixie stories is one reason why many British scholars of the South remember enjoying undergraduate courses on the history of the region so much. Or perhaps American subjects lent themselves to more exciting teaching. Historian of massive resistance, George Lewis, remembers the contrast between his inspiring US history lecturers and one historian of Britain who was told to liven up his classes by using "visual prompts." He brought in a turnip.[57]

As for familiarity, some historians have pointed to a shared narrative of history. [58] In *The Burden of Southern History*, C. Vann Woodward noted, "the South had undergone an experience that it could share with no other part of America – though it is shared by all the peoples of Europe and Asia – the experience of military defeat, occupation, and reconstruction."[59] "The result," suggested John Boles, the former editor of this journal, in his *A Companion to the American South* (2002), "is that southern history is studied ... throughout the English-speaking world and beyond."[60] After interrogating various British scholars on his trip to the UK, Jim

---

[55] Each historian has their own story to tell of their journey to Southern history, much of it seemingly happenstance. This is not just true of British historians, of course. John Boles noted of the contributors of autobiographical reflections in *Shapers of Southern History,* "I was also surprised by how many contributors came to be historians in decidedly roundabout and often serendipitous ways," ix.
[56] Badger, "Confessions of a British Americanist," 516; see too "An Interview with Tony Badger."
[57] Zoe Colley, David Anderson, and George Lewis, replies to authors' questionnaire.
[58] On the influence of Britain on the South, and vice-versa, see Laurie Langbauer, "Early British Travelers to the U. S. South," *Southern Literary Journal*, 40 (Fall 2007), 1-18; Joseph P. Ward, *Britain and the American South: From Colonialism to Rock and* Roll (Jackson, Miss., 2003); Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford*,* eds. *Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass and Transatlantic Reform* (Athens, Ga., 1999).
[59] "The Irony of Southern History," in C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge, 1993), 190.
[60] John B. Boles, ed. *A Companion to the American South* (Malden, Mass., 2002), x. Peter Kolchin noted that whereas comparative Southern history initially focussed on understanding Southern particularity, since the 1990s there has been accelerated recognition that Southern history "can hold

Cobb agreed. “The South's history of tragedy, poverty, and defeat resonated with people like Cambridge University historian Michael O’Brien, whose hometown of Plymouth was flattened by the Luftwaffe during World War II.”[61]

On the face of it, familiarity and exoticism seem rather mutually exclusive explanations. Nor can they, on their own, be causal – they can only explain why British historians are drawn to the South once a historian has set their eyes on America in the first place. After all, if British historians wanted to find colorful politicians, there are plenty of places to study beyond the United States; for flattened World War II cities, they can take their pick of many parts of Europe; and, as for tragedy, poverty and defeat, the world is open. Such explanations tend to be impressionistic asides, too, and inevitably over-generalize some fifty years’ worth of scholarship.

Nonetheless, both the ideas of familiarity and exoticism have merit, and, in fact, they work together. Because of what we now call Americanization, the history of America—and within it, the flamboyant, painful history of the “other America,” the South—became well known to Britons in the later twentieth century.[62] Thus the rise of southern history in Britain is part of the bigger story of the rise of US history in response to the surge of interest in (or import of) American culture and news more generally.[63] The reason why David Anderson could fall for the *Dukes of Hazzard* was because Luke and Bo and Daisy were a highlight of Saturday night viewing on 1980s British television. Many British scholars were similarly drawn to US history because they had been attracted to American popular music, or were inspired by living memories of freedom struggles or the counterculture—topics which often played out in the South.[64] Some British historians of the South note that they spent time in the

---

important lessons for historians striving to make sense of developments elsewhere.” “The South and the World,” 566.

[61] Cobb, “Vienna Sausage.”

[62] On the impact of American culture on Britain, see H. L. Malchow, *Special Relations: The Americanization of Britain* (Stanford, Ca., 2011).

[63] On this more general rise, see Heale, “The British Discovery of American History.”

[64] On British Americanists’ particular interest in liberalism, see Michael Heale, “Writings in Great Britain on United States History, 1945-1980: Some Reflections on a Liberal Moment,” in Hanke, ed. “Guide to the Study of United States History, Volume II,” 363-441. According to the You the People database, after race, the most popular topic studied by British Americanists relates to film and music. The concurrent growth of academic interest in southern culture and literature followed similar trends of connection and popular interest in Britain. Southern novelist William Faulkner had a particularly strong pull on the imaginations of literary scholars such as Richard Godden and Richard Gray who, once they had first visited the fictional Yoknapatawpha County, would return there repeatedly throughout their careers. Richard Gray, email message to Clive Webb, February 20, 2019. Key works on Faulkner by these scholars include Richard Godden, *Fictions of Labor: William Faulkner and the South’s Long*

US at a formative age, either through family links, memorable vacations, or undergraduate exchanges. Then there was the language factor. US historians are sometimes chastised for their lack of languages, but it is a charge that can be levelled at many British scholars of America, too. For many British academics, then, southern (or US) history had all the intrigue of foreign history, yet it was familiar, and without the problem of having to work up a new language.

But what difference did their position and outlook as British historians make to their interest in and writing about the South? The only British historians to explicitly adopt a distinct, outside observer, style were scholars who preceded the first generation of southern specialists. They did so precisely because the South was more distant in terms of cultural knowledge and accessibility at that time, and they were writing for British audiences. In particular, Peter Parish, whose first book on *The American Civil War* (1975) was published by London's Eyre Metheun rather than an American press, positioned himself as a detached observer, with part of his remit to educate a domestic audience on the South. Parish wrote that his writing on the Civil War and slavery was from "a safe distance and a transatlantic perspective" – with an emphasis on the safe: "It may be some small advantage to the author of a study of this kind that he has not himself been a combatant in any of the major controversies."[65] His reception stateside showed that his efforts to stay out of the heat of battle were successful. In this journal, no less a reviewer than James A. Rawley praised Parish's "cool, Scot's look" at the Civil War. Reflecting on Parish's life in an obituary, also in this journal, British historian Donald Ratcliffe reckoned Parish's overview of the debates over slavery took "a dispassionate view of the subject - in a way, some said, that no American could quite have managed."[66]

Ratcliffe could have added, "and in a way few future British scholars would want to."[67] Subsequent scholars invariably positioned themselves as southern

---

Revolution (Cambridge, 1997); Richard Godden, *William Faulkner: An Economy of Complex Words* (Princeton, NJ, 2007); Richard Gray, *The Life of William Faulkner: A Critical* Biography (Oxford, 1994).

[65] Peter J. Parish, *Slavery: History and Historians* (New York, 1989), xi.

[66] James A. Rawley, Review of Peter J. Parish, Slavery, History and Historians, *Journal of Southern History*, 42 (February 1976), 125-26; Donald J. Ratcliffe, obituary for Peter J. Parish, *Journal of Southern History*, 68 (November 2002): 1020-21.

[67] One notable exception can be found in Susan-Mary Grant's introduction to the collection of essays written by British and American scholars of the Civil War, in Grant and Parish, eds., *Legacy of Disunion* (2003), "the European perspective can, in places, shed a different light on aspects of the war's legacy that, from an American perspective, are sometimes too close for comfort." 4

historians who happened to live elsewhere rather than as distinctively British historians writing about the South. The first generation of British scholars of the South explicitly joined the debates on their own terms. Badger, for example, remembers that he set out to explore the New Deal in North Carolina in "the context of a clearly defined American historiographical problem."[68] The second generation of British southernists followed in these footsteps. In the introduction to their edited volume on gender and the civil rights movement, Peter Ling and Sharon Monteith acclaimed the predominantly British contributors who had "produced work in the field that demonstrated that a European based scholar could meet American standards of research practice." The editors made no claims, though, for a distinctive approach. "Historians," they observed, "are conscious that their writing is shaped as much by their own time as by that of the time they investigate."[69] Whether place mattered as well as time was not discussed by the authors nor by subsequent British historians of the South. Indeed, in replies to our questionnaire, some respondents strongly rejected the notion that their location might make any difference to their research agenda, perspective or writing style.

In many ways, the work of the first and second generation of British scholars backs up their claims that they wrote as southern historians who happened to live elsewhere. Indeed, until the last few years, British scholarship on the South has mostly eschewed explicit comparisons or connections between southern and British history. This absence is all the more striking given that C. Vann Woodward promoted the comparative approach, and some of the first British historians of domestic United States history (though not those who wrote on the South) did write comparative history.[70] It was also a contrast with the practice of British literary scholars, and the writing of comparative and connected southern history in other parts of Europe, too.[71]

---

[68] Badger, "Confessions," 517.
[69] Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, eds., *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2004), 11, 12.
[70] See *The Comparative Approach to American History* 1968. Intriguingly, Woodward did not include British scholars who were working on the comparative approach to US history (they were not Southern historians). Looking back, Woodward did not feel his book had made much of an impression on scholarship by American historians. For reflections on *The Comparative Approach,* see Carl J. Guarneri, "Reconsidering C. Vann Woodward's The Comparative Approach to American History," *Reviews in American History,* 23 (September 1995), 552-563.
[71] British literary scholar of the US South, and later Honorary Fellow of BAAS, Helen Taylor, wrote *Circling Dixie: Contemporary Southern Culture through a Transatlantic Lens* in (New Brunswick, NJ, 2001), but there was no comparable work by an historian. On Europe, see, for example, the Southern Studies Forum of the European Association American Studies Conference in 2002, "Southern Cultures: The American South and/in Europe," Chair Waldemar Zacharasiewicz.

Scholarship on the American South in Italy, for example, has compared the "two Souths."[72] Valeria Lerna, a southern historian from the University of Genoa, reflected that her choice of research topics was "was directed by my need of understanding what can happen to a Nation after a devastating civil war."[73] Similarly, historians of the American South in France have often focused on international dimensions of southern history, including French imperial history.[74]

Indeed, Tony Badger recalls that he locked himself into an American mindset so tightly that, ironically, one southern reviewer of his first book noted that the only interest group of the 1930s that Badger failed to investigate were the British buyers. (Badger recalled later that the irony was all the greater because the main British buyer was the Imperial Tobacco Company, whose headquarters were in his home city of Bristol.)[75] A similar irony could be levelled at British scholars of the civil rights movement – it was actually American-based scholars who led the charge to internationalize the struggle, while many British-based scholars focused on the movement in the South, sometimes at the local level.[76] The main exception has been, of course, studies of slavery that link the slave South to the Atlantic world, although even here, there is little evidence that British historians are more inclined to place the South in an international perspective than their US counterparts.[77]

---

[72] See, for example, Susanna Delfino, "The Idea of Southern Economic Backwardness: A Comparative View of the United States and Italy," and other chapters in Susanna Delfino and Michele Gillespie, eds., *Global Perspectives on Industrial Transformation in the American South* (Columbia, Mo., 2005), 105-30. The fact that this was one of many collaborations with Michelle Gillespie (Wake Forest) is a reminder that such comparative scholarship with Italy (and elsewhere) was undertaken by historians based in the US too. As with British scholarship on Southern history, scholars from continental Europe travelled not just for research trips but in their careers. For example, Enrico Dal Lago, who has written extensively on US South – Italian comparisons, graduated from Rome, gained his MA in Kansas, PhD in London before teaching in London and since 1999, in Galway. www.nuigalway.ie/our-research/people/humanities/enricodallago/ For discussions of the history, breadth and development of comparisons between the South and other parts of the world, including Italy, see Kolchin, "The South and the World."

[73] Replies from Valeria Lerna and Susanna Delfino to author questionnaire.

[74] See, for example, Nathalie Dessens, (University of Toulouse-Le Mirail), work on southern slavery's connections with the West Indies, such as *From Saint-Domingue to New Orleans: Migration and Influence* (Gainesville, Fla., 2007).

[75] Badger, "Confessions," 517.

[76] An exception here was Mike Sewell, US historian at Cambridge whose main research interest is in US foreign policy, who made an early contribution to British interest in the civil rights movement with his chapter, "British Responses to Martin Luther King, Jr and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968," in Tony Badger and Brian Ward, *Martin Luther King and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1996).

[77] In our questionnaire, Tim Lockley, historian of slavery at the University Warwick, was one of the very few British respondents to suggest that "non-southerners do have a distinctive European voice." Lockley thought "we are more willing to see cross cultural/national connections. My own research has suggested, for instance, that colonial South Carolina should probably be considered as part of a greater Caribbean in the 18th century far more than part of mainland North America." Lockley's doctoral

Indeed, when reading through the work of British scholars from the 1980s onwards, the main hints that individual authors are not native southerners lie in the silences: in particular the absence of the characteristically engaged – what C. Vann Woodward called the "didactic" – southern style; less of a stress on southern story-telling (though perhaps more of an emphasis when compared with British historians of British history), and the absence of personal reflection in prefaces and epilogues.[78] In an article in the *Journal of American History* in 1992, Tony Badger wondered whether a decision "to downplay one's British identity in a desire to achieve credibility is to sacrifice the opportunity to make a substantial contribution to American historiography." Badger asked, "Are British historians simply to be anonymous clones of worthy but conventional professional American historians?" Badger's concern mirrored wider concerns in that period about British writing of US history more generally. In 1985, senior British Americanist, Michael Heale, soberly evaluated that, "there is little about the British historiography of the U.S. which strikes one as innovative."[79]

Taken as a whole, however, a distinctive British engagement with Southern history does emerge in the work of British historians. The pattern was not so much of style or substance, though, but of subject selection. This was not true of the first generation of Southern historians, who worked on a range of topics from intellectual history to the New Deal. But for the second generation (and for some from the first generation in their later careers) there was seemingly but one main topic of interest in southern history: race, and especially the civil rights movement. It was this almost exclusive focus on race relations that suggests that many British scholars were not simply historians writing southern history who happened to live elsewhere but were distinctively – perhaps unwittingly – influenced by their British location.

During the period circa 1980 to 2005, southern historians in the US were also vigorously engaged in the writing of racial history, of course, and set the terms of the debate. Indeed, Badger reflected that it was the excitement of historiographical

---

supervisor, Betty Wood, also put Southern history in a broader context, including in collaboration with Sylvia Frey at Tulane. *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

[78] C. Vann Woodward, *Burden of Southern History*, ix). See too, Mario Del Pero, Tibor Frank, Martin Klimke, Helle Porsdam, and Stephen Tuck, "American History and European Identity," *American Historical Review,* 119 (June 2014), 780–90.

[79] Michael Heale, "Writings in Great Britain on United States History: Some Reflections on a Liberal Moment," in Hanke ed., *Guide to the Study of United States History*.

developments in the history of slavery, and then civil rights, which led him to change his teaching and research from the New Deal towards southern race relations (initially slavery, then civil rights).[80] But, taken as whole, southern historians in the US explored a wide range of subjects – John Boles' *A Companion to the American South*, for example, has 25 chapters summarizing distinct and varied topics. Yet, of these chapters, the majority of British scholars were interested in just two – those to do with slavery and especially civil rights.

In doing so, British historians were surely reading concerns about the present and future state of their own country into southern history's past. Late 20th century urban Britain was fast becoming multicultural, and for some members of the public, uneasily so. Immigration was a hot topic of debate in general election after election, and what the media labelled "race riots" in the early years of Margaret Thatcher's prime ministership unsettled British sensibilities.[81] George Lewis sums up a sentiment that seems to have been true for many who focused on the civil rights movement: "I was first drawn to theories and practices of racism, largely because of childhood experiences in a genuinely multi-racial and multi-cultural place, and the South - for obvious reasons - provides strong material for its study."[82]

Because of Telstar and the speed of international news, the civil rights movement of the 1960s had played out on British television screens and on the front page of British newspapers, a story of struggle and hope, and its icons became British icons too, not least because race leaders from Martin Luther King to Malcolm X visited Britain.[83] Images of the movement were seared into British popular memory. In 1998, for example, Westminster Abbey in London erected a statue of Martin Luther King. By this time, the US civil rights movement was one of the top three most popular history subjects for seniors at British high schools (after the Nazis and the Tudors). The fact that resources for the history of the US civil rights movement, such as the *Eyes on the Prize* documentary series, were so readily available, meant the movement was eminently teachable too. For his part, Badger became a researcher of civil rights after teaching a course on the subject.[84]

---

[80] Badger, "Southern History From the Outside."
[81] For further insight into the state of British race relations in that period, see, for example, Simon Peplow, *Race and Riots in Thatcher's Britain* (Manchester, 2019).
[82] George Lewis, response to authors' questionnaire.
[83] See, for example, Brian Ward, *Martin Luther King in Newcastle upon Tyne: The African American Freedom Struggle and Race Relations in the North East of England* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2017).
[84] Badger, "Southern History from the Outside."

British scholars interested in race matters could have turned to plenty of other anti-racist struggles around the world, of course, with anti-British imperial independence struggles top of the list.[85] Such topics have indeed attracted British scholars within the framework of imperial or Commonwealth studies. But the American South held particular attraction not just because it was so well known, but also as it was the most analogous story, that of a subjugated racial minority in a country professing equality. More than elsewhere, then, it was America's Dilemma—as British activists and commentators in the 1960s were quick to point out—that was also Britain's.[86] In other words, studying the South was also an exercise in self-perception, perhaps by implication rather than explicitly – not written as didactic history, but a learning exercise even so.

Material for the civil rights movement in the South looked especially strong in comparison to seemingly weak resources from the UK. In the public mind Britain had a "race problem", but did not have the history of a social justice movement. This assumption was, and is, entirely bogus. Black British activists and their allies have a remarkable history to tell.[87] However, that history was not being taught in British higher education, was little known by the public, and was absent from the school curriculum.[88] Thus Britons' disproportionate interest in civil rights struggles on the other side of the Atlantic rather than within their own country was not merely a consequence of Americanization, but also reflected a denial of their own history. After all, the power of history is not just what we remember, but what we forget. This forgetting, in fact, mirrored the British media's outlook of the 1960s, when the US movement often attracted more attention than anti-racist struggles at home. In this

---

[85] One example of this important recent scholarship is David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire: Testimonies from the Mau Mau Rebellion in Kenya* (London, 2005). One of Badger's jobs since retirement from Cambridge has been to chair the commission that has overseen the release of hitherto hidden documents on British violence during the Mau Mau rebellion.

[86] Clive Webb, "'We cannot escape the same challenge: Britain France, and the U.S. Voting Rights Act' in *The Shadow of Selma*, ed. Joe Street and Henry Knight Lozano (Gainesville, Fla, 2018), 113-29.

[87] For examples of such telling, see, for example, Hakim Adi, *Black British History: New Perspectives from Roman Times to the Present Day* (London, 2019); Adi, *West Africans in Britian 1900-1960: Nationalism, Pan-Africanism and Communism* (London, 1998); David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London, 2017); Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London Is The Place For Me: Black Britons, Citizenship and the Politics of Race* (Oxford, 2016), and Rob Waters, *Thinking Black: Britain 1964-1985* (Berkeley, 2018).

[88] Kehinde Andrews, *Resisting Racism: Race, Inequality, and the Black Supplementary School Movement* (London, 2013); Abdul Mohamud and Robin Whitburn, *Doing Justice to History: Transforming Black history in Secondary Schools* (London, 2016).

context it is little surprise, to quote Birmingham (England) born civil rights historian Joe Street, that it was the "great morality tale of the South" which won particular attention among southern history subjects.[89]

Thus the rise of interest in Southern history at the end of the century was not so much to do with the region, but the topic – to a large extent, for British historians civil rights, the South was merely the stage on which the story was enacted. Perhaps it was ever so, and not just for civil rights. Looking back, Tony Badger remembered that he had set out to study the New Deal rather than the South for his doctorate, in particular, the constraints and opportunities facing President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the local level. "I just happened to be studying that question in North Carolina rather than Montana."[90] It was only later he became a southern historian. Even for Michael O'Brien, as David Moltke Hansen has observed, "the South served as a place of inquiry — an intellectual, even more than a physical geography requiring attention – but not as a defining context."[91] There are examples of this topic-specific route into southern history from scholars on the European continent, too. For the Italian historian of the South, Susanna Delfino, her "interest in southern history sprang … from a theoretical concern about the relationship between capitalism, slavery, and industrialization, of which the antebellum South offered the quintessential example."[92]

Coming to southern history through interest in a particular topic rather than in the region surely influenced British scholarship on the South. In Badger's case, he reflected later that his "indirect way" into southern history meant that he did not engage with foundational texts such as C. Vann Woodward's *The Origins of the New South* (1951) until much later in his career. Badger contrasted his experience with Michael O'Brien, who had studied for a master's degree in the South and thus "addressed from the start of his career questions of southern identity and southerners' sense of self." Badger also reflected that his focus on the New Deal as a case study that happened to be on the South meant that he knew little else about the region at the start of his career, either. Badger's experience is common. The fact that British doctorates are short – only three years – and do not involve anything other than the

[89] Joe Street, response to authors' questionnaire.
[90] Badger, "Southern History from the Outside," 208.
[91] https://s-usih.org/2017/03/mind-and-place-michael-obrien-and-the-american-south-guest-post-by-david-moltke-hansen/
[92] Susanna Delfino, response to authors' questionnaire.

specific research project means that British early career scholars rely for background knowledge of the South on possibly the one solitary southern (or maybe just one US) history course they took as undergraduates.[93]

Badger would remain a southern historian following his first study of a topic in the South, as did some of the generation of British historians who followed him. Brian Ward, for example, followed his initial work on civil rights and music with a range of books on music, culture, and race in the South. He also taught for several years at the University of Florida. It was a similar story for some scholars on the European continent, too. Manfred Berg (who does not work on the South exclusively) noted that his interest in the region was initially "kindled by my research on the civil rights movement and then expanded to other topics such as slavery."[94]

But many British scholars moved in a different direction, following their topic of interest away from the South. Even Michael O'Brien, to quote Hansen again, following the publication of *Conjectures of Order*, "bemused many colleagues then by announcing his intention to leave southern history for other climes and a different range of engagements." O'Brien gave up his leadership of the Southern Intellectual History Circle and the Southern Texts Society. British historians of civil rights, especially, followed the new directions in that field to a national and international perspective, beyond the South.[95] Some have started to explicitly connect the British and American stories just as scholars of slavery had long made the connections. In so doing, British scholars have followed, rather than taken a lead, in the transnational turn in civil rights history (and in history in general).[96] One particular contribution, though, has been a focus on the American connection with Britain – the initial emphasis of the transnational turn in the United States had been to place the American struggle in the context of anti-colonial movements and the Cold War.[97]

---

[93] Badger, "Southern History from the Outside," in Boles, 210. For more on British and European doctoral systems, see Heale at al, *Historians Across Borders.*

[94] Manfred Berg, response to authors' questionnaire.

[95] Hansen, op cit.

[96] Examples of American historians who internationalized the study of the civil rights movement include Robin Kelley, "But a Local Phase of a World Problem": Black History's Global Vision, 1883-1950," *Journal of American History*, 86 (December 1999), 1045-77; Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), and Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001) .

[97] Clive Webb, "Britain, the American South, and the Wide Civil Rights Movement," in *The U.S. South and Europe*, ed. Cornelis A. van Minnen and Manfred Berg (Lexington, Ky, 2013), 243-63. American-trained historians have also taken a lead in making this connection. See, for example, the collection of

Meanwhile, there are continuing examples of scholars from continental Europe making connections between the South and Europe, including the 2013 collection of essays *The US South and Europe: Transatlantic Relations in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,* edited by Manfred Berg and Cornelius Minnen, director of the Roosevelt Study Centre in Middelburg, Holland. The collection, which brought together scholars from the US, Britain and continental Europe followed a conference of the European Association for American Studies on the same theme, and sought to lay a foundation for a synthetic and systematic study of transnational connections.

More generally, the newest generation of British historians have diversified beyond southern slavery and southern civil rights, though both topics remain popular.[98] In part this is because of developments within the historiography – among scholars, the US civil rights movement is now seen in a national (and international) rather than Southern frame, and similarly slavery is often placed in the wider Atlantic framework. Conversely, British students interested in race are increasingly aware of the British story, so there is less incentive to look to the US South. In addition, the rise of southern history as an established subject in British universities has introduced a wide range of topics to aspiring graduates, and other subjects have relevance for the current moment in British history – such as the history of Southern conservatism.[99]

The appointment of American-raised and -trained academics to British posts has also contributed to the diversification of scholarship on southern history produced within the United Kingdom. Some American historians who have relocated to the other side of the Atlantic retain a strong interest in, and attachment to, the history of the communities and region from which they hail – to paraphrase Gilmore, they have brought with them a personal stake in the story they are telling. This is evident in the research done by New Orleans native Anthony Stanonis on the tourist industry in that

---

essays written by British and American historians in Robin Kelley and Stephen Tuck, eds., *The Other Special Relationship: Race, Rights and Riots in Britain and America* (London, 2015).

[98] On civil rights, see, for example, Althea Legal-Miller's research as Black girls as central actors in the Black Freedom Movement in Americus Georgia. ""The unmentionable ugliness of the jailhouse:" sexualized violence, the Black Freedom Movement and the Leesburg Stockade Imprisonment, 1963," (King's College London: PhD., 2011).

[99] See, for example, David Ballanytne, *New Politics in the Old South: Ernest F. Hollings in the Civil Rights Era* (University of South Carolina Press, 2016); and Tom Packer, "Jesse Helms and North Carolina politics, 1972-1984" (Oxford: DPhil, 2012). Ballanytne, who is director of the David Bruce Centre for American Studies at Keele, was supervised for his doctorate by Tony Badger.

city and Bruce Baker's study of lynching in the Carolinas.[100]

*

That the institutionalization of southern history in British higher education has been a slow and precarious process is not surprising. It was only after World War Two that British universities reluctantly overcame the condescending attitude that the notion of "American history" was an oxymoron. Although the immediate postwar era witnessed an unprecedented expansion in the number of faculty posts in American history, the rationale for doing so ran counter to a specific study of the South. As the British historian of the United States, Michael Heale, has observed, the geopolitical realities of the Cold War made it important for universities to inform the British people about their principal diplomatic and military partner. The scholars appointed to lectureships in American history therefore tended to be liberal progressives positively disposed towards the United States. Their study of the American past had a contemporary political utility, written as it was for British audiences with a particular focus on the transatlantic connections that underpinned the supposed "special relationship." The domestic history of the South—replete with racial discrimination, reactionary religiosity, and political violence—fell outside this intellectual and political paradigm.[101]

The eventual expansion of positions in southern history was in part due to the chance of timing. British interest in southern racial history coincided with an increase in posts in American history and increased doctoral funding for American history more generally. Thus those scholars who gained faculty appointments in the first and second generations did so in open US history posts, or at least in open colonial or modern American history positions – and they happened to work on slavery or civil rights. Once in post, historians such as Brian Ward at Newcastle, Robert Cook at Sheffield, Mary Ellison at Keele, Peter Ling, Sharon Monteith, and Richard King at Nottingham, Betty Wood and Tony Badger, both at Cambridge, supervised a

[100] Anthony J. Stanonis, "Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American imagination," *Southern Cultures*, 14 (June 2008), 109-31; "The Triumph of Epicure: A Global History of New Orleans Culinary Tourism," *Southern Quarterly*, 46 (April 2009), 145-61; Bruce E. Baker, *This Mob Will Surely Take My Life: Lynchings in the Carolinas, 1871-1947* (New York, 2008).
[101] Michael Heale, "The British Discovery of American History: War, Liberalism and the Atlantic Connection," *Journal of American Studies*, 39 (December 2005), 357-69.

generation of doctoral students. Badger and Wood supervised at least 19 students each.[102]

Such teachers also put on attractive undergraduate courses on the civil rights movement. Badger's "Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement" was by some distance the most popular history special subject – a document-based final year course – at Cambridge for many years. (This came as a surprise to some at Cambridge. When Badger proposed the course, one colleague dismissed it as "dreadfully modern" while another worried there would be no take up because of competition from other more attractive options such as "charters in medieval Florence.") Such courses did not generate British scholarly interest in US civil rights, at least not initially. Indeed, in Badger's telling, it was the other way round: "teaching undergraduates made me a southern historian."[103]

These courses did provide a vehicle for the university study of civil rights, though, and their popularity presumably influenced faculty panels when assessing future appointments and allocations of resources. As research into, and teaching of, US civil rights and slavery gathered momentum, it began to become self-perpetuating. Applications for funding for research in this area needed little justification. Universities bought microfilm collections and, later, digitized resources. Library holdings included the slavery imprints at the British Library, the Civil War collection at Swansea University, and civil rights papers at Cambridge, Leeds, Leicester, Newcastle, Oxford, and Sheffield among others. British historians put on civil rights conferences, many supported by funding from resources from Tony Badger's Mellon chair at Cambridge. Seemingly any university that took US history seriously put on a dedicated civil rights course. Students arrived expecting to study civil rights, having been taught about the subject in high school. Badger recalled that his course in Newcastle, "The South and Race: From Slavery to Civil Rights," developed into a more focused course on the Civil Rights Movement because "that was what the students wanted to hear about."[104] The fact that so many students sought courses on

[102] Figures for Tony Badger drawn from the Institute of Historical Research online database. Again, the incompleteness of these records means that the number of students could be higher. For Wood, see "2018 honorary member," www.historians.org/awards-and-grants/awards-and-prizes/honorary-foreign-member.
[103] Badger, "Southern History from the Outside," 211, 209.
[104] Badger, "Southern History from the Outside," 210.

the civil rights movement, and that existing scholars started to teach them, reaffirms this distinctive moment in British history.

Yet the very success of specialist southern courses may have prevented British research students following Badger's indirect path from being a student of a particular topic in the South to a research interest in southern history more generally. Badger's undergraduate students, for example, took a specific module within broader undergraduate courses in history rather than pursuing interdisciplinary American Studies programs (the development of Southern history in this respect was something of a contrast with American history in Britain, which was often done in an interdisciplinary American studies context – and a stark contrast to American history in Europe, which was invariably studied in an interdisciplinary context).[105] As a result, the second generation of British southern historians emerged from the same mold as the first. With a few notable exceptions, their research for their first books shared an emphasis on exhaustive empirical data matched by a lightness, or even absence of, theory.[106] Given their determination to erase any distinction between themselves and Southern scholars, too, none of them adopted an explicitly comparative or transnational model of analysis.

The popularity of specialized courses on southern race relations may have become somewhat self-perpetuating, underpinned by their reliance on existing resources. Given the small numbers of US historians in any given British university, though, if one postholder in a faculty taught southern history and race, then there would usually not be space for a second undergraduate specialized course (let alone a second member of faculty), in a different aspect of southern history. Thus a concentration on race may have squeezed out other important Southern history topics, such as on women's history or religion (though of course such subjects can, and indeed should, be taught together).[107] At the postgraduate level, because research

---

[105] On the distinctiveness (compared with the US) of the British interdisciplinary context for US history, see Grant, "American history: British historians," 522. For more discussion of US history courses in British and European universities, see Heale et al., *Historians Across Borders*.
[106] Among the exceptions, see, for example, Brian Ward's first book, *Just My Soul Responding*.
[107] On the obstacles to teaching US women's history in the UK, see, for example, Kate Dossett's experience at Leeds where a course she sought to put forward on U.S. women's history had to be renamed under a title including race, "Teaching U.S. Women's History in British Universities: a personal and political history," September 7, 2015, www.baas.ac.uk/usso/teaching-us-womens-history. The lack of attention to women's history in Southern courses in some universities no doubt was also a result of explicit and implicit bias in US history networks in the UK, and in the UK history profession more broadly. It is notable just how many of the second generation scholars who focussed on civil rights were men. For attempts to redress this in American studies in the UK, see, for example, the

collections in southern history are uncommon in Britain, those that have been built up over the last several decades in slavery and civil rights provide an accessible and affordable alternative to extensive overseas travel for doctoral students.

The large number of faculty in African American history also stands in stark contrast to the few who hold posts and work on Black British history.[108] There is no reason why there shouldn't be faculty in both fields, of course – quite the opposite. But it is notable that the growth in institutional support for African American history was not accompanied by support for Black British history. It is hard to determine cause and effect, but the disproportionate interest in African American rather than Black British history at the university level is clearly connected to public perceptions and the experience in British schools, where the latter is rarely on the curriculum.[109]

If the development of individual institutions helps explain the perpetuation of interest in particular topics, the development of national networks helps explain the style of British academic writing on the South. Regardless of their personal origin or career status, many southern historians in Britain see professional organizations on the other side of the Atlantic as being of equal, if not more, importance to their sense of affiliation and identity. All of the scholars who responded to our questionnaire confirmed that they were members of the Southern Historical Association, but several were not involved with the principal professional organization for Americanists in their own country, the British Association for American Studies (BAAS), and even fewer with the Royal Historical Society – the umbrella organization for historians in

---

Women in American Studies Network, founded in 2017: www.baas.ac.uk/mission-statement-of-wasn-women-in-american-studies-network.

[108] See RHS report. Recent years have seen the beginnings of welcome change, both in terms of studying Black British history and in appointing Black scholars to history faculty positions – this is long overdue. For recent appointments in Black British history, and the need for thoroughgoing change, see "A Legacy of Hope: An Interview with Dr. Kennetta Hammond Perry, Director Stephen Lawrence Research Centre," *Black History Month Magazine,* 2018, 4-5; "Dr. Christienna Fryar to lead new M.A. Black British History Programme," www.gold.ac.uk/news/ma-black-british-history-lead; "Olivette Otele: UK's first female black history professor to research Bristol's links to slave trade," www.historyextra.com/period/21st-century/olivette-otele-uk-first-black-history-professor-slave-trade-bristol-university/. See too Ayo Oluyemi, "Life and Times of Britain's first Black history professor, Hakim Adi," www.younghistoriansproject.org/single-post/2019/03/08/The-life-and-times-of-BritainE28099s-first-black-History-professor-Hakim-Adi.

[109] Data is not available, but anecdotally, the authors of this article find that when speaking to final year high school students, all will have heard of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, but usually very few, if any, have heard of Claudia Jones or Paul Stephenson, dynamic leaders of modern British anti-racist protest. For studies of Jones and Stephenson, see Marika Sherwood, *Claudia Jones, A Life in Exile* (London, 2000); Madge Dresser, *Black and White on the Buses: The 1963 Colour Bar Dispute in Bristol* (Bristol, 1986).

Britain.[110] Little wonder, then, that British historians of the South did not position themselves as outsiders, since that was not their academic experience. In so much that they found themselves on the margins, it was with their home institution and national academy, where they were in a small minority – and they found their home among colleagues in the South.[111]

Similarly, British scholars of the South found the easiest route into publishing first books was through US, often southern, university presses. There were fewer equivalent presses in the UK, and most of these were not in the market for monographs on the South in any case. US university presses were also an attractive option because they had no (or not much) need for translation, and copies were priced more attractively – UK presses often priced first monographs exorbitantly, for library purchase only. The consequence was that many British historians of the South began their academic careers based within American networks, writing predominantly for American academic audiences, and guided by US editors and marketing, and would have little inclination to do anything other than research and write in the style of their American counterparts. In this way British scholars had a different experience to their colleagues in Europe. Manfred Berg was one of many who noted that he had to "wear two hats." Berg sought "to be recognized by my American colleagues ... At the same time I feel obliged to speak to German general audiences as well," which led him, and other scholars on the continent, to make explicit comparisons and connections from the outset.[112]

Although there are many British historians who have carved out research careers in southern history, none of them are able to specialize in the same way with their teaching. Most academics are appointed to open US history positions, and while

---

[110] Some respondents to our questionnaire felt that BAAS's inter- or multi-disciplinary approach did not suit their own focus on history.

[111] Their marginal status in their home institution may also explain why some British-trained scholars often felt less need to be methodologically innovative, since they were already being innovative just by studying Southern history. This British Americanist experience of being marginal was even more strongly felt on the European continent. Wolfgang Helbich in 1985 compared the marginal existence of American history in the West German academy to that of Sanskrit and Egyptology." "Watersheds in Time and Place," 100. On structural influences on European Americanists for "going native," see Nicolas Barreyre, Max Edling, Simon Middleton, Sandra Scanlon and Irmina Wawrzyczek, "Brokering" or "Going Native": Professional Structures and Intellectual Trajectories for European Historians of the United States, *American Historical Review*, 119 (June 2014), 760-70.

[112] Manfred Berg, response to authors' questionnaire. In 1986 Michael J. Heale shared a similar view of British Americanists who had "the peculiar condition" of being "simultaneously members of two academic worlds, British and American, and have to give heed to both." "American History: The View from Britain," 501.

they may be able to offer one specialized course relating to their research area, the other courses they offer usually have to span many aspects of American history. Under financial pressure to accept graduate research students, faculty who work on southern history may find that a majority of their doctoral students do not work on the American South, let alone on their research area. In some smaller departments, some postholders who may research on a topic in southern history do not teach exclusively, or even principally, in United States history. This problem is even more acute on continental Europe, where departments rarely have more than one American historian. Again, to quote Manfred Berg, "In general, I would not encourage a German junior scholar to specialize in Southern history because this would not be a prudent career choice for establishing themselves in German academia."[113] In Britain, the breadth of teaching may explain why some British historians of the South, like their British counterparts in American history generally, have written synthetic overviews. Tony Badger, for example, wrote a general history of the New Deal, while Adam Fairclough and Robert Cook, among others, have written overviews of the civil rights movement.[114]

*

What then is the future of the southern past as studied in Britain? While the last several decades have considerably raised the profile of British historians of the South, this trend may not be sustained. In the last decade, there has been a slight increase in the number of doctorates in Southern history, though with a sharp decline in 2018, down to just two completed doctorates—the lowest figure in eight years and one more consistent with the decades before the "invasion" of British scholarship. Overall, the trajectory has been far from linear, and in truth, the numbers remain so small as to render it difficult to measure any discernible pattern. The plateauing of engagement in southern history in terms of theses has been mirrored by the number of publications on the South in the *Journal of American Studies*. By our count, between 2010 and 2019, 5% of research articles published in the journal have focused on the South – a

[113] Manfred Berg, response to authors' questionnaire.
[114] This stands in a long tradition British writing on America: see Peter Parish, "American history arrives in Europe" https://www.nytimes.com/1985/02/03/books/american-history-arrives-in-europe.html.

return to the proportion in the 1970s. The principal focus of these articles on the South is still on race. But again, the overall numbers are too small to determine the emergence of any new trend. [115]

One reason why British scholarship in southern history is vulnerable is because it has never been institutionalized in the UK. More specialized, recently formed, British professional bodies in US history focus on different time periods rather than regions, namely the British Group of Early American Historians (BGEAH), British American Nineteenth Century Historians (BrANCH), or Historians of the Twentieth Century United States (HOTCUS).[116] Southern history has been well served by these bodies. Betty Wood helped to found BGEAH in Cambridge, in 1996, while BrANCH has co-sponsored three conferences in southern states since 2005.[117] But they have militated against the formation of a dedicated British body to sustain or promote Southern history. This stands in contrast to the situation on the European continent, where the Southern Studies Forum was formed in 1998 as part of the European Association for American Studies, and meets annually.[118]

Within individual universities, southern history has not been fully institutionalized either in terms of faculty positions. Rather, the rise of Southern history relied on individuals specializing on the South who held open posts in American history. Thus new appointments can be made in any field in US history. For example, during his tenure at Cambridge between 1992 and 2014, Tony Badger deployed the resources of the Mellon chair to facilitate a transatlantic network of British and American (and continental European) historians through his hosting of numerous seminars and conferences on the South. However, the Mellon chair is not specifically in southern history, so it was always likely that Badger's successor would

---

[115] By our count, 18 articles were published on aspects of southern history. (This does not include the seven articles published in a specially commissioned issue on Hurricane Katrina at the very start of the decade, in 2010).

[116] There is also a range of other British American networks which Southern historians have joined, such as Society for the History of Women in the Americas (SHAW), founded in 2008 as the British Historians of Women in the Americas (the organization was subsequently renamed to reflect a more international membership), and regional and national associations (the Scottish Association for American Studies, for example, was founded in 1999).

[117] South Carolina in 2005, (https://branchuk.wordpress.com/conferences/previous-conferences/edgefield-2005/), Texas in 2014, (https://branchuk.wordpress.com/conferences/previous-conferences/2014-rice-university-houston/), Missouri in 2020, (https://branchuk.wordpress.com/conferences/2020-missouri-call-for-papers/). The title of the 2014 conference, "As Others See Us," implicitly raised the issue of what distinctive contribution scholars from outside the United States make to the study of southern history.

[118] Only a few British scholars have been regularly involved.

not be a southern historian, as has indeed proved the case. Across Britain, then, the fall of southern history could be as fast as its rise, when the second generation of southern historians retire. This is entirely beneficial for the development of American history in Britain, since selection panels can chose from a wide range of applicants, and appointments can respond reasonably quickly to new debates in historiography or new areas of interest among British students, or, hopefully, to remedy glaring omissions in provision, such as posts dedicated to women's history. But it means the status of southern history is vulnerable to rapid change.

An example of how quickly the complexion of US history in Britain can change is the Cunliffe Centre for the Study of the American South at the University of Sussex. Named after the pioneering British Americanist Marcus Cunliffe, the Centre opened in 2007. The center ran a lecture series that showcased the scholarship of British researchers alongside that of some of the most eminent American historians of the South. In spite of this, it struggled to recruit graduate students and publication of the lecture series ceased when many of the American speakers declined submission of their planned contributions. Faculty changes, including the departure of the director for a position in the United States, led to the centre's premature closure in 2014.[119]

The vulnerability of southern history in Britain is exacerbated by the harsh financial realities of British higher education. Recent years have seen the slashing of state funding of the university system. An increasing number of postgraduates now compete for diminishing funds. The Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) is the public body that funds doctoral research in history among other disciplines. In 2010, it paid the fees and costs of around only six percent of the postgraduate research students in the arts and humanities.[120] That figure fell even further following the reduction of the Council's budget for research awards from £41.5 million in 2011-12 to £30.5 million in 2018-19.[121] Furthermore, the AHRC funds doctoral research

---

[119] The lecture series did result in three published volumes: Richard Follett, Eric Foner, and Walter Johnson, *Slavery's Ghost: The Problem of Freedom in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore, 2011); Robert J, Cook, William L. Barney, and Elizabeth R. Varon, *Secession Winter: When the Union Fell Apart* (Baltimore, 2013); Richard Follett, Sven Beckert, Peter Coclanis, and Barbara Hahn, *Plantation Kingdom: The American South and its Global Commodities* (Baltimore, 2016).

[120] "Who can afford a doctorate in the arts and humanities now?" http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/jan/17/arts-and-humantities-doctorate-afford-cost (accessed August 13, 2012). The reality is that postgraduate research in the arts and humanities is in danger of becoming the preserve of wealthy students who are able to fund themselves.

[121] "Group wants AHRC to clarify 'broken' position on funding," http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=419402 (accessed August 13, 2012).

through block grants awarded on a competitive basis to academic institutions, which in turn determine which individual applicants will receive financial support.[122] The problem of decreasing graduate funding is certainly compounded for the historian of a foreign country—the prospect of extensive visits to archives in the United States may prove prohibitively expensive for many self-funded doctoral researchers interested in southern history. Alternate sources of funds such as travel awards from academic organizations including the British Association for American Studies are fiercely competitive and usually cover only the cost of a transatlantic flight, not accommodation or subsistence.

The pessimistic conclusion of many respondents to our survey is that there will be a rapid decline in the number of young historians who pursue their interest not just in the South, but in American history more generally. One historian's doleful observation, in response to our questionnaire, was typical of many: "the prospects for UK-based PG research in American history looks to be very bleak at the moment." It is also the case that recent years have seen the much-publicized closure of American Studies programs across the United Kingdom.[123] While the causes for declining undergraduate enrolment remain a source of disagreement, the figures are indisputably discouraging. From a peak of 4,575 undergraduates in 2002-03, numbers fell to 2,895 in 2010-11, a decrease of 36.7 percent, and then 2,285 in 2016-17, a further decline of 25.3 percent.[124]

To make matters worse, technological advances have not ushered in the internationalization of research that might have been expected. Electronic resources such as JSTOR and Project Muse provide British scholars with access to publications such as Southern state academic history journals, and historians of the South in Britain and across Europe have welcomed the increasing availability of archives in digital form.[125] Because the study of the US South is the study of a foreign country,

---

[122] Some respondents to our survey felt that their history favoured British topics, in part because of the higher chance of completion within the four-year deadline for each award.
[123] For a rather gleeful report on the perceived decline of American Studies, see Polly Toynbee, "A Degree in Bullying and Self-interest? No Thanks," *Guardian*, August 25, 2004.
[124] "American Studies in Britain, 2000-2010, A report commissioned by the British Association for American Studies in conjunction with the Fulbright Commission," http://baas.ac.uk/images/stories/Download_docs/american%20studies%20in%20the%20uk%202000-2010.pdf (accessed August 14, 2012); British Academy, "The landscape for humanities and social sciences in higher education: the current picture," https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/TheLandscapeForHumanitiesAndSocialSciencesInHigherEducation_0.pdf (accessed July 16, 2019).
[125] See Grant, "American History, British Historians," 522.

though, often the fast emerging but expensive digital resources on the region inevitably secure a much smaller slice of British university library budgets than their US Southern counterparts (which, in turn, would spend more on US and southern history than on British history). The problem is exacerbated by the current strain on British library budgets, which, except in a few cases, are much smaller than those of American research institutions. Thus British historians of the South have little access to the digitized regional press, for example, including even such flagship publications as the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

Personal and professional factors may also limit opportunities for extensive travel to the United States. Respondents to our survey mostly travel to the United States at least twice a year, including one research trip. Family commitments, though, especially for those with caring responsibilities, preclude lengthy trawls in overseas archives. This may account in part for the shift by some scholars in mid-career to research on more practically achievable transatlantic topics, where the bulk of new research can be undertaken closer to home, or to focus on projects with digitally available sources. The difficulty of overseas travel for some scholars may soon be augmented by ethical concerns among all scholars about the environmental impact of regular transatlantic flights in the face of the climate crisis. Increasingly strenuous competition for leave is another obstacle. These pressures are common to universities in most countries, but have a disproportionate effect on those studying the history of a foreign country.

There are nonetheless reasons to remain optimistic about the academic study of the South in Britain. The global turn in American history (and in history generally) has encouraged British historians to look abroad, and provides opportunities to study the South as part of this global perspective. For example, Emily West at Reading University was one of the investigators of the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded Mothering Slaves international research network. The network brought together institutions from Britain and Brazil (and scholars from around the world) to study enslaved women across the Americas, including the US South. West's article, co-authored with Rosie Knight, on antebellum Southern wet nurses has, since its publication in 2017, been one of the most frequently accessed articles in this

journal.[126] More generally, the network has sought to provide "an important meeting place for scholars interested in making comparisons beyond [national or] regional boundaries to develop future projects that transcend nation states."[127]

Despite the demise of American Studies at some institutions, other programs, such as those at the Universities of East Anglia, Leicester, Nottingham, and Sussex, not only survive but still flourish, and in 2018 the University of Lincoln introduced a new American studies undergraduate degree. In particular, the University of Northumbria has launched a new American Studies program, which includes several southern historians on its faculty. The chair of American history at Northumbria, Brian Ward, is one of the few historians in Britian to study and teach a wide range of topics in southern history. Badger's first doctoral student, and successor in post at Newcastle earlier in his career, in many ways Ward has succeeded Badger in terms of influence on southern scholarship in Britain. Ward served as President of the British Association of American Studies 2016-19, has run an innovative public online course in southern history, and has taken a lead in calling for and producing interdisciplinary and transnational research on the South.

Moreover, while recruitment to American Studies programs has diminished, individual modules are often enthusiastically subscribed to. The transfer of faculty from folded American Studies programs to history departments may also result in the greater integration of modules on the South into undergraduate curricula. Despite the drastic reduction in state funding, the prominence of southern specialists who are now at senior levels in British universities may also create a self-perpetuating cycle in terms of postgraduate recruitment. Funding pressures may also have the positive consequence of encouraging British students of the South to seek to do postgraduate work in the South, with all the benefits that changing country between undergraduate and postgraduate degrees can bring.

Above all, what the past fifty years or so of British historical writing on the South has shown is the extent to which British academics have been drawn to the rich historiographical debates on the South, and the British public to the rich history of the region. So long as those remain, British interest in the South will too. Susan Mary-Grant's (Newcastle) prediction, in 2005 in this journal, has been proved correct in the

---

[126] Emily West and Rosie Knight, "Mother's Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South, *Journal of Southern History,* 83 (February 2017), 37-68.
[127] www.research.ncl.ac.uk/motheringslaves/about, accessed November 4, 2019.

past fifteen years, and seems apt for the next generation, too: "The study of the American South, specifically, will always fascinate British students and academics alike, encapsulating as it does so many of the wider issues that America has faced as a nation." As Grant rightly points out, this study of the South "is only a part of the transatlantic dialogue on American history, the importance of which, in the twenty-first century, cannot and should not be underestimated."[128]

Whatever the future holds, the history of British southern scholarship also suggests that – despite some protestations to the contrary – where southern history is written does make a difference. For cultural and structural reasons, the pattern of British scholarship on southern history has not entirely replicated that of their American counterparts despite, perhaps even because of, the attempts of the first generations of British historians to do so. Recognizing this might encourage British southern historians to play to the advantages of their position across the Atlantic in terms of writing comparative, transnational and collaborative history, and to their position on the margins in the British academy in terms of cross-field, interdisciplinary and again collaborative work. And for all historians of the South, wherever they are based, the example of British scholarship is a humbling reminder that we are not quite the free-floating intellectuals that we might hope to be. Location matters. Or to paraphrase Marx, we need to recognize the structures that we work within, if we want to overcome them.

[128] Grant, "American History, British Historians," 523.